

THE SPECTATORIAL SUMMER ZINE



*Familiar  
Invasions*

Proudly operating out of Innis College



**Innis College**  
University of Toronto

Sponsored by the Student Initiative Fund



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**

Copyright © The Spectatorial 2024. Creative Commons Rights. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the express consent of The Spectatorial editorial staff or the individual authors and artists.

*Familiar Invasions*  
THE SPECTATORIAL SUMMER ZINE





# Table of Contents

2

## **Executive Letters**

INTRODUCTION BY KATARINA KOJIC, JACKY YU, MIRAN TSAY, AND  
DIANA RADENKO

8

## **Faust**

WRITTEN BY ELISA PENHA & ILLUSTRATED BY TYNE VAINIO

18

## **this is the season for family (i am my father's daughter)**

WRITTEN BY OLA KIM & ILLUSTRATED BY MAIYA SCHMIDT

24

## **The Loop**

WRITTEN BY ANYA CARTER & ILLUSTRATED BY ISHITA CHALISE

31

## **The Summer Sweethearts**

WRITTEN BY MIRAN TSAY & ILLUSTRATED BY ALICE SHARIVKER

36

## **Leftovers**

WRITTEN BY JACKY YU

39

## **Tome V**

WRITTEN BY DIANA RADENKO & ILLUSTRATED BY MAIYA SCHMIDT

42

## **1974**

WRITTEN BY PHOEBE SOZOU & ILLUSTRATED BY FATEHA AHMAD

44

## **Welcome Home**

WRITTEN BY BIEW BIEW SAKULWANNADEE & ILLUSTRATED BY FELIXE  
PELLIZZARI

48

## **A Familiar Stranger**

WRITTEN BY ADAORA OLISA & ILLUSTRATED BY FATEHA AHMAD

55

## **The Dungeon of UTSC**

WRITTEN BY NATHAN AGUSTIN & ILLUSTRATED BY ALICE SHARIVKER

61

## **The October Harvest**

WRITTEN BY KATARINA KOJIC

# Letters from the Editors-in-Chief

Dear Speculative Readers,

As you start to feel a cool chill in the crisp, autumn air, a sense of unease arrives. Sweaters aren't enough to keep the biting winds from piercing your skin. The satisfying crunch of the leaves under your feet starts to feel like flesh and bones. As the days quickly turn to night, you can't help but grieve and scream. Why has the sun abandoned us? You fear the night as your dreams turn to nightmares. Mother's Thanksgiving dinner tastes a little suspicious. Acid turns in your stomach as you watch your father eat the turkey, red sauce bleeding through his gums. Was the cranberry sauce always this thick? The scarecrow you helped sew for your cousin's farm is torn, with straw falling out the head. You can't help but sleep lightly for you feel the scarecrow's one-remaining eye stare at you 100 meters away. Is that a crow croaking outside or is that the cackles of a witch...

These are some of the feelings we hoped to invoke in our Fall 2024 zine! Enjoy these unsettling stories with a nice cup of hot cocoa beside you.

Stay tuned for more submission calls!

*Katarina Kojic*

CO-EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, 2024

To our auspicious, daring, enduring readers,

We wish you well in the later stages of Autumn, where colour has already seeped from leaves, the world, and in particular the mood of university students. There is a chill in the air as we brood over upcoming seasonal transitions, where the murky sludge on the Toronto pavement reflects the state of the gray, exhausted corpses shambling to their next class. Truly, Niflheim is nothing compared to our campus.

Our issue itself is also about transition, and the terror that comes with it as comforting memories and places become lost forever. You may be thinking of our poor timing, releasing a horror-themed issue after Halloween. Yet the Spectatorial's modus operandi was never to follow conventional expectations. We aim to unsettle, and unsettle spectacularly. The best way to do so is to scare you where you least expect it.

And in this case, the places you feel the most secure.

Whether it's from that alien book on an old shelf, or a Kafkaesque classroom, or an unseen evil lurking behind a familiar face, this issue aims to reach in and ensnare you through the hiding spots you've grown so accustomed to. Whereas our zine last year focused on the beauty of nostalgia, here nostalgia takes a malevolent turn. Uncanny faces and distorted settings pervade this tome of domestic horror, and there is no escape or shield that can hold them back. In fact, it'll be your blankets and plushies who eat you alive in the end.

To quote Harlan Ellison, "what you hold in your hands is more than a book. If we are lucky, it is a revolution." Our amazingly talented team has poured their heart and soul into creating stories and illustrations that are innovative and carry their unique styles. If you come out of this book finding a retreat into familiarity disturbing, good. We aim to frighten normalcy away to inspire change. "If not, it is still one helluva good book full of entertaining stories."

Thanks for sticking with the Spec,

*Jacky Yu*  
CO-EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, 2024

# Letter from the Managing Editor

Dear readers,

As November sets in, hasn't this year haunted you? Summer has passed in a flash. The beginnings of each month feels blurry. With reading week behind us now, time stands opposite students, armed and at the ready.

This year's theme, a familiar invasion, should sit close to home. What do you see in the mirror, what hovers above your shoulder? Who, or what, pulled the rug out from under your feet? In our summer zine, we offer you interpretations of the wronged earth, of cats and fathers turned shadows, of time stretched thin and tucked away. Glimpse the visuals of what is hardly seen, hardly voiced.

Thank you for reading with us. Join us in the spring magazine, or online, where it's all a bit lighter. We look forwards to hearing about the creatures in your life.

For now, we leave you with these stories. We hope they unsettle you, as they have to us. We hope you feel watched, understood.

Regards,

*Miran Tsay*  
MANAGING EDITOR, 2024



# Letter from the Creative Director

Dear readers,

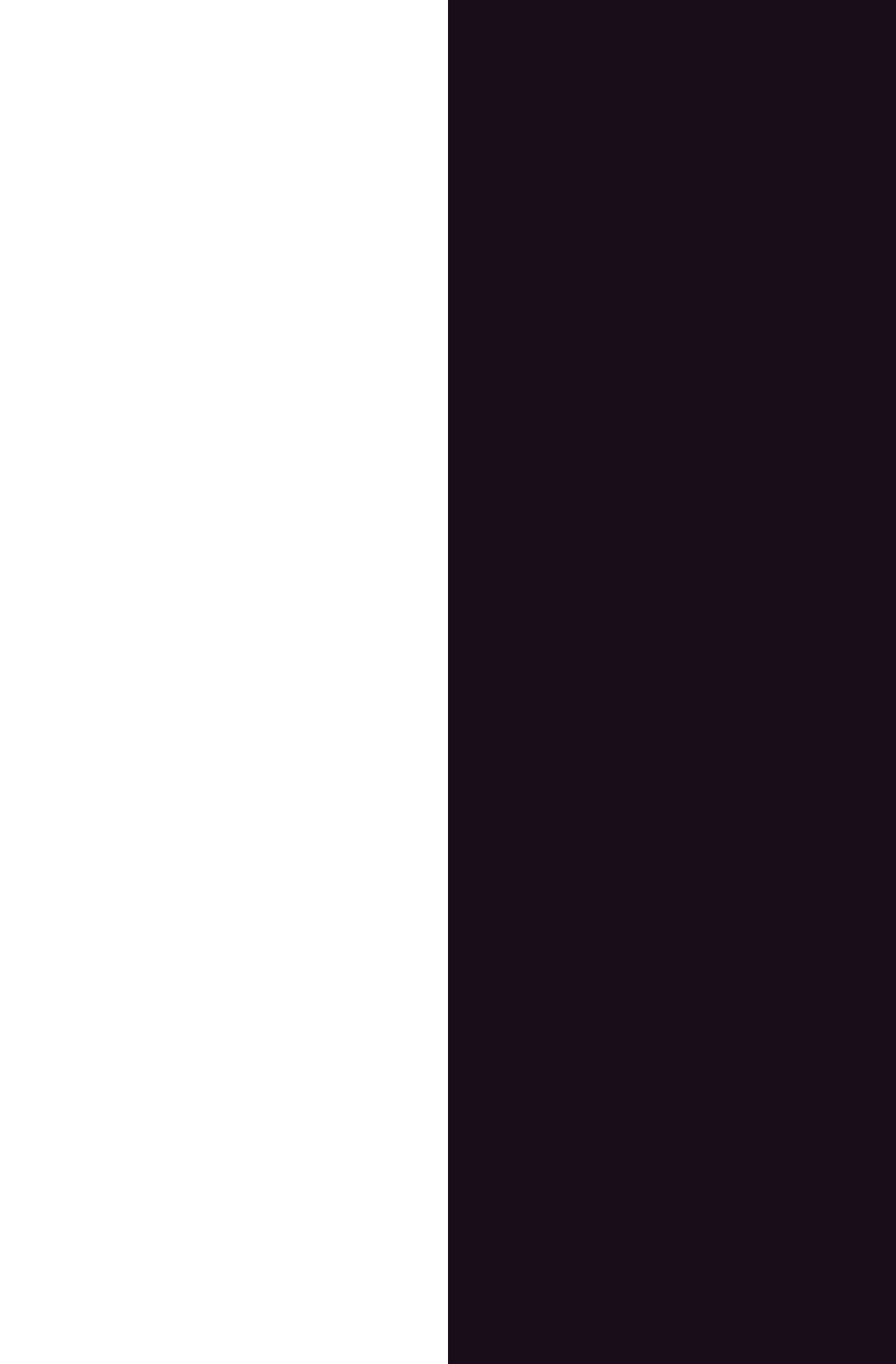
Even as the year has descended easily and slowly into fall, the warm weather treads on summer's disappearing coattails. And what an unusual fall is has been!

Both familiar in its colours and strange in the lasting sunlight it has brought, autumn as a season is one that many of us know well. The blur and bustle of a new academic year, despite its patterns, is a time that memory tells us we should remember clearly, just as summer takes us home to a place within which we should be comfortable. Yet, there's a creeping sense of foreboding that follows... a sense that has found its home in this zine.

It is our hope that the authors' and illustrators' creative spirit chills you thoroughly enough to remember the cold wind this later time of the year heralds, while also invoking the memory of warmth.

Until next time,

*Diana Radenko*  
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, 2024



# STORIES

• • •

# FAUST

BY ELISA PENHA  
ILLUSTRATED BY TYNE VAINIO

*London, 1958*

There was no good reason why it happened for Niall and not for Silas. *It being everything.* The success, the lights, the headlines and stardom. They were of the same graduating class at the same most prestigious London drama school, living on the same creaking floor of the haunted residence halls, with the same ever handsome and timeless faces, and a near flat equilibrium of leading parts across their wholly identical degree. But, one supposes, that being of the same calibre in the simulacra of university meant that the real world only needed one of the two, and the real world chose Niall.

They kept on living together for a while after graduation, until the sort of rumours arising about Niall and Silas and *Niall and Silas* became too unsavoury for Niall to keep on booking the way he was booking. Niall would say to Silas, on that muddy grey evening when Niall claimed to have decided for himself that he would be moving out, that he was only “tired of Shoreditch” and needed to “hone his craft elsewhere”. But Silas knew better. There was yelling, and things were said of the sort that could not be unsaid, and then Niall was gone, and Silas would never see him again, if not for Niall’s face on every West End placard, in every programme, black and white on every newspaper for the next decade. What he means is, Silas never saw Niall in the sense that they never spoke again.

Until *Faust*. An original, two-man show; a retelling of the famous deal-with-the-devil German folktale —the sophomore project of Abigail Crowe, a playwright who came from Ameri-



ca, two years ago with a play so grand and so fantastic that the Tonys might as well have renamed themselves for her. When Ms Crowe came to London with a new manuscript last January, she did not hold auditions. The story goes like this: she sat with a phone book in the dull corner of a pub for hours and then she called Niall Sweeney and Silas Vane herself, in their own homes, not through much disgruntled agents (though, Silas' agent probably would not have picked up the phone, being so unused to summons for the worn through actor). Abigail Crowe gave them their roles on the spot—gave, not offered—shouting over drunkards into the corded telephone behind the bar. Either man would have been foolish to deny her, and so, it would be thus: Niall Sweeney as the Devil, Mephisto, and Silas Vane as the titular Faust, drawn together ten years later by fate, or perhaps something much worse.

Niall Sweeney was a stunning man. He'd grown into the hollows of his face, but his boyishly crooked nose and freckled neck gave just enough way that admirers might delude themselves into believing he was still a starving artist, humble and lowly like them. His blonde hair was brighter than Silas' mousy yellow, his eyes bluer than Silas' dull grey and hollow ones. From across the dim stage, Silas stood swathed in the fabric of velvet wings for just a moment longer than he needed to, staring at Niall and the monstrous way his shadow fell upon the empty audience; a titan, jagged in the places his silhouette bathed the rows of red chairs, and if Silas was not mistaken, a crown of horns atop his head where the shadow finally ended. *A trick of the light*, Silas thought, *or maybe of the heart*. Silas joined him.

"Never early," Niall said, not turning to face him, still gazing off the stage as though it was a mountain's peak and before him lay a conquerable world.

"But not once late," Silas countered. It was eighteen hours exactly. Silas had made a habit of never being anywhere before he absolutely needed to be, and it was the sort of ancient habit that he could not recall its origins, only that it lived soundly within him, like an allergy.

Niall turned at last. "Silas Vane," he said. A plain greeting. He did not say "you look well" or any other lying pleasantries. He did not ask "how have you been" because Niall knew better

than anybody how completely Silas had been discarded so that Niall could be what he was today.

Silas returned the greeting with a small nod: "Niall."

Silas was taller than Niall, just barely, but Niall took up more space somehow. Silas was taller than Niall, but now as it had always been, Silas was looking up at *him*. There was something vacant about Niall's face, something empty that Silas was sure had been brimming with fullness before. Silas wished to speak, to ask something cutting and vague like "do you regret it?" or "did I mean nothing to you?" but he did not. They were men now, their thirties shone through slightly wrinkled eyes, no longer those young and melodramatic thespians who felt they owed it to themselves to be lovestruck just for the sake of it.

Abigail arrived a few moments thereafter, looking pleasantly frazzled (Abigail Crowe had a look about her that gave the impression she was perpetually in the delighted moment of having boarded a train she'd sprinted to catch and just nearly missed), and they began to rehearse. Silas and Niall fell like a comfortable and gentle spring rain into their once familiar rhythm of rehearsal, and though it had been ten years since the last time, they took to the stage symbiotically. It was a thrill for Silas to enjoy performing once more. Yet a cruel reminder for Niall that Silas was, truly, just as good as he. That Niall's fame, its copiousness, was luckier than it was worthwhile. It was making Niall uncomfortable to play opposite him, Silas realised with a smug satisfaction, as the days passed in a harried and chilling fervour. *Closer and closer*, Silas thought, *this play is how I catch up to you*.

The red cheeked coldness of September gave way to unromantic and frigid October. Silas never lingered after rehearsal, not like Niall did, waltzing around the stage and murmuring his lines to himself after everybody else had gone. Back then, this meant Silas was always home first (home being their dormitory, and then their flat). Now, this meant that when Silas kicked off his shoes and hung up his coat, all he could think of was the fact that Niall was not coming. Silas had gotten so used to Niall not coming over ten years that it was a horrible regression of feeling to have the expectation of Niall fumbling with his keys an hour or so after Silas arrived home return so suddenly to Silas' arsenal of ritual memory. It was not fair. Silas threw his balled-up scarf

harshly at the wall. Niall did not get to simply *be* and still command all of Silas' attention. Niall had the world. He did not need Silas too.

It was in this meanwhile of Silas despairing by his lonesome that Niall Sweeney met with his Horridness for the first time in a long time. Niall had begun dealing with the man who called himself Lucifer some years into his stardom, a darkly attractive, tuxedo wearing youth with a leather rough spaded tail that he tucked into his waistband, and a mouth for making impossible promises, among other things. Niall knew what it looked like. But Niall *had not* sold himself for fame. He'd not needed to; Niall was brilliant. But then, so was Silas, and that was the problem, wasn't it?

It was a creeping monomania at first. There was no good reason why it happened for Niall and not for Silas, so there was no good reason Niall would get to keep it. Before Silas had completely given into his failure, he and Niall had been like racehorses, tied at the neck for a plethora of parts. Niall remembered those mornings, brushing their teeth side by side at the rusted sink in their cheap flat, Niall fastening Silas' tie on the streetcar to the casting, the two of them usually being the only ones left in the waiting room after all the callbacks were through. Silas forgot those mornings and abandoned all his potential to face Niall. But Niall never forgot. Silas' talent was like a leech inside Niall, a reminder of their likeness, that Silas may find his potential again and come for Niall's life bearing arms and his impossible-to-deny smile. Niall had not sold himself for fame. He had sold himself so that Silas would remain without it.

"Are you going to invite me to opening night?" teased the Devil, gliding around from behind a streetlamp. "You're playing *me*, after all."

"Hardly." Niall opened a black umbrella and walked to him, Niall's dress shoes clicking on the wet pavement. "My character is much less of an arse."

Lucifer grinned. Niall could not help but grin too and hated himself for it. "It's been a long time, Sweeney," he said. "Though I am not dim enough to ask *why now*."

Silas hung between the two of them like an anvil on fraying rope. Niall worked his jaw as the rain came down. The Devil did not get wet despite standing without an umbrella, the shower

curved around him, silhouetting him. Niall's socks became damp at the ankles.

"I thought I was fine," said Niall. "I thought I'd established myself well enough that I did not need . . . *you* anymore. I was through screwing with Silas, I figured if *I* hadn't ruined his career, he'd by now done it himself by giving up completely. I didn't want to harm him anymore; he's always done that just fine on his own."

Lucifer's white teeth gleaned. "But . . .?"

"But he's *good*, Lucifer!" Niall pleaded. "He's never been anything but. And everybody will know. I've done so well for ten years, but people *will* tire, and who better to fill my shoes than the man with my face?" Much less just Niall's face; Silas had Niall's voice, his tutors, his secrets.

"So, what do you want?" crooned the Devil.

"*Faust*," said Niall, "this play. Don't let him leave it. Make this the greatest thing Silas Vane will ever do, and don't let him rise any higher." Niall's hand grew frostbitten where he held his umbrella. He remembered meeting Silas, only eighteen years old, finding him perched in the open window of their shared room with a novel in one hand and a cigarette in the other, that Silas would later admit to just holding, and not smoking, because he thought it made him seem *older*, though he could not bear the smell. Niall loved him instantly, and he still did, but nobody would believe that. Least of all Silas.

"Sure thing," said Lucifer casually. As though Niall had asked him to help move a couch. Niall furrowed his brow as he asked, "And your payment?" Lucifer had been chipping away at Niall's soul for a while now. Niall figured this ought to be the final piece, and the one to make Niall *his* at last, and Niall was ready to hand himself over. But the Devil gave a gentle shake of his head and vanished into what was becoming a storm.

On the day *Faust* was to make its premiere, Silas arrived promptly at the theatre at sixteen hours, just as Abigail had requested, to find Niall had been there (unnecessarily, Silas might add) since twelve. Silas observed: the known curve of his spine while Niall stretched his neck, every vertebra familiar to Silas as the moles on his own legs. The songs Niall hummed to himself while combing his hair and pacing were the same, too. Silas used



to sing them. But there were ten years and devilish envy between them, splintering Silas from Niall, and every comfortable tick of Niall's that used to make Silas love him so terribly was now nothing but rotten: Niall's bones looked wrong in his body, not lean and alluring, and his humming was no longer a safe white noise to Silas, but the most awful of melodies. Silas wanted to beat it away.

"Silas." Niall's voice came sharply from the vanity bench where he was sitting. There was hardly a half hour until the show. Silas turned, realising he'd been absentmindedly tapping white foundation to the same spot of his jaw.

"It was . . ." Niall hesitated, "undeniably pleasant," he decided, "to act with you again." After a sordid moment, Niall added, "I missed you," and he said it more guiltily than Silas had ever heard him speak before. Like you might say: "I've had an affair." or "I killed a man and I need you to love me anyway." Silas did not know what to do with it.

"I don't believe you," Silas told him flatly. "*Missing me* would have meant birthday cards, Christmas cards, showing up at my door and sitting on the step until your feet were sleeping."

Niall swallowed. He was all throat. "I got your cards."

"I'm sure," snapped Silas.

"I didn't know you came around."

Silas scoffed and felt childish for doing so. "It was years ago. I stopped when I felt rightfully pathetic about it." Silas rubbed the patch of foundation on his face, smearing his fingers, and he sighed, "All I want, Niall, is to tell you how delighted, how *proud*, I am of you. But I'm not that good a man. I was barely that good a boy. We play fantastically together, and it only makes me angrier that you took that from me by going away."

Abigail barged into the room, then, as she often did without calling out or knocking. "To the stage my darlings!" she fluttered, and then hurried off again. Niall checked his watch, which he'd left tucked under his black shirtsleeve. Silas saw his expression fall as Niall clamoured to his feet, and a brief, smug smile took Silas' face, knowing he'd made Niall late (rather, late by Niall's terms, meaning he was early) for the very first time. His face fell before Niall could see.

Instead of rushing away, after Abigail, Niall stepped to Silas

and came down to his knees, gripping Silas' hands in his lap and looking up at Silas where he sat. "You are good," Niall said, almost breathlessly. "So good. You always were and always will be, in every sense of it. I have half a soul, Silas Vane, and I love you with all of it."

Silas' expression oscillated from puzzled to petrified, frantically searching Niall's face for some sense, which he did not find. "What has gotten into you?" Silas demanded. Silas and Niall were all too used to speaking to one another thusly, grandly, unabashedly: quoting poets and princes while they danced drunkenly down London roads and slept tangled in limbs in one of their beds. They'd confessed love often and sincerely as young (younger) men, but it was always (and only ever) part of the show they were putting on, for the audience of none. But now, *now*, what was once expected from Niall had become unprecedented, and Silas was very scared. He did not get an answer, because Niall chose then to follow Abigail to the stage. Silas went after him. The show began.

Niall and Silas moved through *Faust* like a warplane cut through air. Sharp and unrelenting, impossibly intimate. Unlike the German folktale itself, Abigail's *Faust* told only the ending of the drama: a conversation between Mephisto and Faust preluding Mephisto's carrying of Faust to Hell. As the conversation neared its closing, Niall dragged his chair over to Silas, and while Silas heard Niall speaking his lines, another voice, smooth and sly, seemed to beam from his mind to Silas' ears.

*Hello*, it said.

Silas blinked and stammered out his line, and thought back, *Hello?*

It sounded as though Niall's voice had become quilted together with another. *This is unfortunate*, it said, *you have the kindest eyes*.

Niall continued speaking over the dreadful voice emitting from him, though he appeared concerned now, and Silas realised he'd stilled in place. Hushed murmuring came from the crowd, but it was too tinny for Silas to mind.

Slowly, Silas' heart began to fail, and Niall realised that it was not the little left of his soul that Lucifer was taking with him as payment, it was Silas. Which was, in a sense, the very same

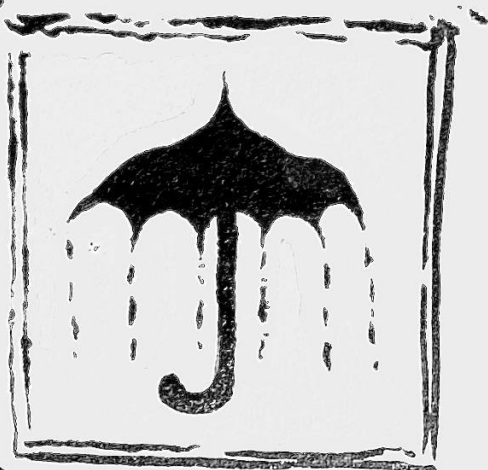
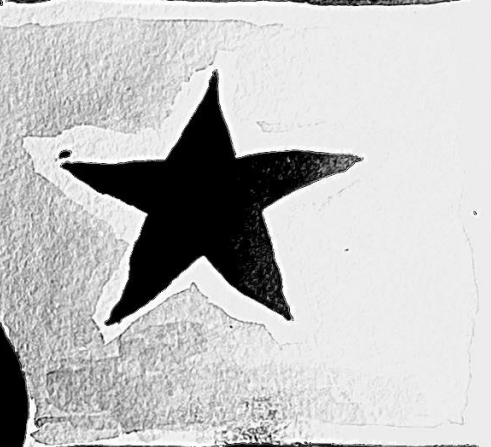
thing. Silas collapsed to the cold wooden stage and Niall cried out. He dragged Silas' heavy but brittle body onto his knees, clutching Silas' shoulders fast to his chest, hollowing his nose into Silas' dry hair. And Niall cried, desperately, for the first time in a long time.

The audience rose as Niall wept, a thunderous applause rising with them, as Niall cradled dying Silas. Abigail Crowe had outdone herself again, thought the critics hollering in the front-most row. Niall Sweeney would be the most decorated actor in English history, thought everybody together, and nobody would forget Silas Vane ever again.

End.











# THIS IS THE SEASON FOR FAMILY (I AM MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER)

BY OLA KIM

*ILLUSTRATED BY MAIYA SCHMIDT*

this is the season for family, the way i've forgotten how to say a word on my own, as my brother and i did growing up — silent because there would always be our mother's voice, floating by on the interim. here in my own apartment, it is quiet.

this is the season for family, the way that the plant hanging in front of me is long dead, the way i never learned how to keep plants, because our housecat has a taste for them and we never could keep the green out of her teeth. she couldn't have reached this one, all the way across the Pacific, but the plant dies anyway, by proxy of me forgetting its existence, by proxy of me, loving and missing my cat.

my cat, a british shorthair, small-boned and yellow-eyed, sits in the little space my brain has carved out for remembering her, front paws tucked under her small gray chest. in her absence, the patch of floor by my heels that should be hers, that follows me even when she doesn't, creates something else in lieu of her, a thing grown from longing and lost and gray fur. claws spindly and unkempt, pelt matted and tangled, hisses and yowls and cries of hysteria that i never heard from her when we were by each other's sides. telling me to remember her. making me remember. a punishment for leaving; my own, haunting familiar. she spits something dark and slimy into the shells of my footprints. her yellow eyes flash in my periphery when it gets dark.

this is the season for family, the way i hate this apartment, hate it for its emptiness. in my last month before moving out, i spend all my time in the hidey-hole of a place connected to my bedroom, the space that my roommates and i call the alcove and our landlords call the sunroom, with a door that shuts and three windows that open, large enough to fit an ottoman and little else. like i've been afraid, somehow, of the expanse of our little apartment and have finally decided to hide away, when my roommates aren't around to help fill the space. i have never been able to fill the space.

the hanging plant is in here; i'm looking at it now. my half-formed feline familiar does little to teach me how to help it survive.

this is the season for family, the way i picked up smoking after leaving home, killing myself just a little more the further i stray. the smell seems to follow me wherever i go, and only when i'm alone; drifting through open windows, seeping in through cracks, embellishing itself into the fabric of clothes, the strands of dark hair i got from my father. with him in view, the smoke vanishes, dissipates into the air, and i can see clearly for the first time since i've left him. or maybe it's just him, taking it all back from me.

my father, just how i remember him, friendly and eloquent and docile. my father, and the hulking creature he has become.

he seems to grow every time i see him, intangible but palpable, some fourth dimension that only he and everyone like him can grow in. his sadness is something invisible to me, invisible and even more terrifying. something i wasn't aware of growing up, something i didn't know the name for, but now, into adulthood, it is all i know. if this, to me, is the season for family, a new yearning for home, a new learning for missing them, then it has been my father's whole life.

the uncanny valley is described as a feeling of unsettlement, of feeling something that should be human but just isn't convincing enough to be true. my father grew up there. my father loved his

siblings there. he learned to call it home, too-wide streets and a house more like a cavern, huge, but i know better. sometimes i think that i know his home better than he does, despite never living there, because i still regard it as his. besides an ethnicity and surname, it's like he's forgotten it, the town he earned his name from. lost, digested, by the creature that is him.

he talks, sometimes, like breaking through the barrier, like seeing clearly suddenly, through the haze of smoke. he has recollections, sometimes, of climbing peach trees for succulent bites, a white spitz dog from his childhood home, swings nearby, sword-fighting his brother with sticks. he remembers his hands, slapped by a teacher because a class rep dropped a tray of milk and the whole room was punished. he has memories, vague and murky, of the whole neighborhood, huddled around a small black-and-white television, watching the first moon landing, together.

he has a hobby, his only hobby, of taking photos. he never goes anywhere without his camera. attached to it is my old high school lanyard, the blue like a permanent stain around his wrist. blue so permanent it has started to fuse, ink melting into something less than skin and more than whatever lies underneath, a hide twisted and reptilian.

he never goes anywhere without his camera, and snaps his photos, as if, in lieu of his faded, cloudy memories, he takes new ones instead. he sneaks pictures of pedestrians, storefronts, dogs and cats, and me. there are no photographs of him. there are never any photographs of him.

my father, and his brother, his sister, and his parents. fleeing home because of a war he had nothing to do with. a child, stripped from his peninsula to the east and landing in the west, where he would learn to never belong, where he would grow a new skin and shed his old one, a thorny, hulking metamorphosis. sap oozing black and thick between his scales. every step he takes digs into the ground, footsteps like craters, like his body is trying to return to his home all the way through the earth, even if he doesn't remember.

his sister is four years older. his sister has four years worth of memories that he doesn't. sometimes, when he manages to break through his scaly hide, he calls her *noona*, 누나. *big sister*, in the language that he's meant to still be able to speak.

my dear, forgetful father. my beloved, hazy heritage. i love him. i can't face him. he looks too much like me. he made me like this.

i can't help it. i love him. i love him and i hate the creature between us. the creature that is him.

*han*, 한, is an emotion described as a sense of cultural grief, of sorrow, of resentment. a national, collective, traumatic response. a thing. an ideology; a curse. it lives in my family. it lives in my father. it is the creature that is him. i think it must be hereditary, the way i've never lived like he has yet i grieve for a homeland that has never been mine. i feel my scales growing. i feel a new hide forming like quills, spikes, a pelt i will never be able to shed.

i live afraid. afraid that i've stretched myself too thin, leaving people behind in country after country after continent, nothing remaining but a trail of dark water, following, mocking. only a few years behind my dark, unkempt familiar. how can i stay, knowing there are things i'm losing by the minute? how can i run, knowing there is nowhere to go?

and i have a tendency to bite, subconscious, at anywhere my teeth can reach, imprints of bite marks scattered across arms and wrists and mouth, like i'm trying to let the creature out. hereditary. i'm sure it happened to him, too.

i think it's too late. i think it's always been too late, since the day my father immigrated as a child, never to return. since i was born, in a city that is mine but not his. i think that one day if i bleed, let it trickle and ooze, that it would come out thick and clotted and black. i've been thinking, lately, that i should pick up a camera.







# THE LOOP

BY ANYA CARTER

ILLUSTRATED BY ISHITA CHALISE

My head is throbbing, and I don't think it's motion sickness. The air in my train car is stagnant — the ventilation has probably been busted for months. When I exhale, I swear my own breath lingers around my face. Not to mention the ever-present scent of urine that has seeped into the seats. *Why the hell did they line these things in fabric?*

There are nineteen stops on the Loop, with no particular beginning or end. It services the industrial district, the overcrowded city centre, the airport, I could go on. In theory, you *could* ride this shitty merry-go-round around and around on only one fare, but you definitely shouldn't.

Shifting my gaze back to the inside of the train car, I let my eyes wander over the few people in my section. Beside me sits a mother with her boy who's playing with her bracelet. Down the carriage is a middle-aged businessman with a briefcase by his feet. Across from me is a young woman whose eyes are closed, but she's sitting up so straight I can't tell if she's actually asleep.

Suddenly — but not unexpectedly — warm light blooms through the train car, and I can see the morning's first light kissing the treetops of the valley surrounding us. For a few seconds, I don't notice the few people around me, their smells, their sounds, that are usually suffocating me. In the distance, the horizon glitters with the glass buildings of Downtown, where I'm going for my long-awaited appointment at employment services.

As we re-enter the tunnel, we're once again illuminated only by artificial light, and I feel my shoulders become heavier yet again. I lean my head back against the metal wall and close my eyes, trying to fall asleep amid the train vibrating my skull.

. . .

I'm awoken by nudges to my thigh, and I open my eyes to see a little sneaker pressed against my jeans. The boy is perched on his knees on the seat next to me, looking out the window with his nose pressed against the glass. We're above ground again.

"Tom, that's dirty, get down from there," his mom scolds him, smiling at me with a grimace. I look away, fidgeting with my hands in my lap.

"But I saw something!" He's beginning to dirty my jeans. *This was my nice pair, too.*

My brain stuffy with sleep, I don't make any effort to follow his gaze, and the Loop is once again engulfed in darkness, only the fluorescent lights of the train car illuminating the vicinity.

"I really did see something!" Tom insists, shuffling down from the window. "There was a lot of smoke."

His mother combs through his hair in an unsuccessful attempt to calm him down.

"It was probably just a factory, honey."

When I replay these moments in my brain hours later, I realize that we had been nowhere near the industrial district.

The young sleeping woman is now awake, posture still rigid as she stares near the ceiling. I follow her gaze to see she's looking at a map of the Loop pasted above the doors. The businessman, however, is visibly less calm, gripping his briefcase to his chest, his body stiff as he stares at the floor with furrowed brows. When he suddenly meets my gaze, his eyes are wild, and I become very aware of how quiet our train car has become.

"The train hasn't stopped," he mutters in a grave voice.

I feel a chill run through me – did the car suddenly become colder?

"We've gone past six stations," his voice shakes as it raises in volume, "but the train hasn't stopped at any of them."

"That's impossible," I say.

"No. I-I'm sure of it." He nearly trips on his way to the

map, and I follow him. His stare bores into the map as if there's an answer hidden in the white, dotted circle, he just has to look hard enough to find it.

"Where are we on here?" I can't tell how long I've napped for.

"Right here," a soft voice says. The girl's arm extends between me and the man, her fingertip landing on a spot between two of the stations.

"I'm sure there's nothing wrong," Tom's mother is pretending to be calm to soothe her son, but her voice quivers, "the train's probably just been taken out of service."

*With us still in it?*

As if mocking our panic, the Loop's lights flicker before going out entirely. Tom's shriek pierces my eardrums.

"Ohhhh, shit, shit, shit" the businessman groans.

The emergency lights turn on within a few seconds, and the dim red lights reflect in the girl's eyes, wide as she stares at me. Her face shows no signs of uneasiness, and I briefly wonder how she's so calm before trying to conjure up any possible solution.

Then I spot it.

I clamber onto a seat and reach for the red handle above me.

"Everybody hold on, I'm gonna pull the emergency brake."

Exchanging nervous looks, everybody clings onto the bars like their lives depend on it – they probably do.

*Three,*

I wrap my arm around a bar in case I go flying.

*Two,*

I squeeze my eyes shut.

*One.*

I yank on the handle, but the floor is still rumbling, and outside the window is a complete blur.

*It didn't work.*

I pull again, and again, and again. A hot rage bubbles up in my belly. *Holy fuck, am I gonna die in this shithole? Of all places?*

Tom's crying is muffled as he burrows further into his mother's embrace. I feel tears welling up in my eyes, and I hear myself mumbling, "no, no, no, no, no," until arms grip my waist to pull me down, and my nose is inches away from the girl's.

“It’s okay,” she pats my shoulders, “just breathe.”

I mirror her own breathing and eventually, my tears stop flowing and my legs strengthen under me.

That is, until we’re speeding through an underground Loop station, and the grimy beige of subway tiles zooms across our view. The businessman leaps to his feet, banging on the windows with both hands and screaming for help, which only helps to scare Tom even more. I amble to the window, grabbing poles to anchor myself. The train ceases to slow, but I’m able to make out vague details of the platform. Through blurred silver and white flashes, I can tell there are bits of foil and paper littering the ground. Every surface seems shades darker, as if a thick layer of grime has built up. Maintenance isn’t usually that great, but this place looks like it hasn’t been cleaned in years.

As the platform disappears into darkness, the shouting ceases and I slump to the floor by the door, mind jumbled yet completely blank at the same time.

“What the hell is happening?” I mumble into my hands.

The businessman sinks down beside me, back against the door with his legs splayed out in front of him as the train jiggles us. I close my eyes and consider how this is what it would feel like to be in the mouth of a beast as it ambles along, carrying you to its den.

It’s silent for a few moments, only metallic rumbling surrounding us, until Tom’s mother voices what we’re all thinking: “So what do we do now?”

The girl shakes her head, sliding down beside me and crossing her arms.

“We just wait,” she finishes, sighing.

The dim fluorescent lights highlight her cheekbones and shoulders.

“How are you so calm?” I finally ask her.

She tilts her head back to rest on the door, and then tilts her head to me. “I just have a feeling, you know? That we’ll be alright.” Despite her words, her eyes don’t soften, her stale stare reminiscent of a doll.

Suddenly the car is flooded with orange light, Tom’s shrill scream making my stomach plunge. We stumble to stand up, and I blink once, twice, as if my brain is struggling to sync with my

eyes.

The land outside is unrecognizable. If there were any buildings, they must have been flattened. The only evidence of nature are mere tree stumps, barely visible under a thick layer of orange dirt that seems to coat the landscape endlessly.

There is wind outside, the orange dust being heaved up and sent through the atmosphere, like waves washing sand upward from the sea floor. A whimper ekes out of me through the lump in my throat.

Tom's mother stifles her weeps, clutching Tom's face to her belly as he tries to wrestle his way out. For the first time this whole ride, the businessman is silent, his face blank but void of colour.

I feel suddenly weightless – I'm flying through the air, my body limp like a ragdoll. My head hits something hard, and pain explodes down my body as my vision ceases.

. . .

When I come to, I'm still inside the train. Light floods into the car, tinting everything golden. I sit up with a groan, immediately regretting it as pain engulfs my head. Everyone around me is starting to come to as well, and I realize that we're still. The train has stopped.

The girl limps to the doors and tries to pry them open with her fingertips.

"Wait!" The businessman tugs on her pant leg, "the air, the dust... what if it's toxic?"

"Well, we're gonna have to get out at some point." She forces the doors open, and dust billows into the car, the odorless powder coating her in orange and making my sinuses itch.

The girl hops down onto the narrow platform outside the train car, the train's floor meeting her waist. She offers her hand, and it feels grainy between our sweaty palms as she helps me out of the train car.

"Look!" Tom points to a point on the horizon, and when I squint, I see black dots moving over the hill like little ants.

People.

A few kilometers away, they appear to be approaching pretty

quickly. Their urgency is comforting.

"I told you we'd be alright," the girl takes my hand and squeezes. Even though we've met mere hours ago, I squeeze her hand back.

I forget we're not alone until the businessman speaks up.

"They're moving really fast, alright."

I hold my free hand to my forehead, and amid the peachy haze I see the black dots growing larger, approaching rapidly. They appear to be larger than average people – military suits? – with tubular equipment hanging from their shoulders. Some sort of ventilation system for the dust, I assume – they've probably brought some for us.

My hand is still being held, and it's becoming uncomfortably sweaty. I try to unlatch my fingers, but she maintains her grip.

"We're gonna be okay," she repeats.

She's staring directly at me, and it's the first time I see her smile. It's a wide, closed-lipped grin that doesn't reach her eyes.

The military men are a hundred or so meters away. As they move forward, there's less and less haze obstructing my view. Their military suits are an unusually slick, shiny black. The ventilation equipment – what I *thought* was ventilation equipment – is actually part of the suit: dark, ribbed, hose-like structures, one extending out of each shoulder, that don't flop around with the rhythm of the runner, but rather move independently.

They twist about the men, as if the open ends of the tubes are scanning their surroundings. I can begin to make out more details: each tube performs a faint pulsing contraction akin to an intestine passing food. With each pulse, it becomes increasingly clear these aren't military suits.

I hear the businessman's briefcase hit the floor, and land on its side. *Thunk, thunk.*

These aren't even military men.

I can feel my blood begin to pool in my hand, which the girl is still gripping.

"You're gonna be just fine."

*So much for my appointment.*

# *The Summer Sweethearts*



*Miran Tsay*

# THE SUMMER SWEETHEARTS

BY MIRAN TSAY

*ILLUSTRATED BY ALICE SHARIVKER*

The summer sweethearts stay for far too long. Minami watches one of the creatures buzz toward the trap she made this morning: cherry pits and watermelon rinds, stale seaweed crackers and sticky napkins. The mini compost pile sits on the kitchen counter in a clear cup covered in plastic wrap. Minami's older brother poked holes in the makeshift lid. The sweethearts are trapped, buzzing uselessly and crawling over each other. From where Minami sits on the other side of the living room, they look like overlapping black circles, a mass of winged annoyance.

The sweethearts always overstay their welcome into fall. Although it's the end of August, the sun isn't any more lenient than it was in the middle of summer. The creatures live off of the morning's condensation and lazily photosynthesize as Minami sweats out oceans.

She sits on the sticky living room floor trying not to touch anything, the hardwood and air included. She's stationed in front of her family's decade-old fan, lifting her shirt to have it balloon with the fan's wind. There's a constant hum from one of the blades skimming a dent in the fan's cover. Even the wind going up her shirt feels hot.

Minami entertains the idea of having another orange popsicle and knows she won't. Her stomach is full of sugar and liquid; carbonated milk soda and the mugicha she had with breakfast, cold mint candies and ice cubes she pops in her mouth hour



after hour, hoping uselessly that they'll cool her down. Her older sister says the heat is as much of a mind game as a practical game: if Minami believes August is bearable, it will be. Minami lost the second she woke up. There's no space to think, the heat flattens and fries all of her, including her brain.

One of the sweethearts lands on Minami's hand, ticklish and round, and she shifts her palm across the floor. The creature falls and skitters in circles on the hardwood, little feet tap-tap-tapping against the floor. It vaguely follows her hand, looking for something sweet. There might be residual sugar on her fingertips. Minami swats the sweetheart again. It is just smaller than her fingernail, and half its body weight is fluff. It must be buried in fur and boiling alive.

Minami's older sister always said the sweethearts would be better suited for winter, with their dreary complexion and mound of insulation. Instead, they blow in the wind like dandelions, lazily riding the updrafts of Minami's city, black clouds that shrink and expand outwards until entire blocks are blanketed with black dust. On hotter days, you can see swarms of the creatures rising in the air, below the birds and above the houses.

When she lived downtown as a child, Minami could never glimpse them. They were too small and too far in between. But they love the countryside. They're greedy with the open space, zig-zagging and tunneling up as high as the altitude allows them to go. Now, Minami spends her evenings swatting hoards away from the dango at festivals and watching the sweetheart's formation break and reform as she and her siblings set a volleyball back and forth.

Soon it'll be September, and by then Minami's dad will be sick of the sweetheart's humming, and her mother will squash instead of swat. The sweethearts will go from inching towards watermelon on the dinner table to learning where to take refuge. They find nooks and crannies in the kitchen, they scuttle from hands that will continue to follow them.

A few dark marks have already appeared on cabinets. They signify the break out of the fly swatter. There's a rip in one side of the plastic mesh, but it still works. Later, when neighbourhoods have less patience, pest control trucks can be seen around the block. People are sick of finding the sweethearts in the

seams of their clothes, sticking to the kitchen backsplash, in half-opened drinks and left-out snacks. It's past their season.

For such slow creatures, extermination happens fast. The sweethearts die in the cold, so people will chase the creatures out with air conditioning, with ice in the sweetheart's favourite hiding spots, with fans that actually cool. The professionals have what Minami called "freeze-lasers" as a child. Silver cannons that smelled like stale bread and chemicals, the length of the machine well over the size of the seven-year-old head. The machine is attached to a vacuum that leaves behind not a single speck of dust. Minami's parents called in a team one year, telling her siblings and her over and over again to stay away from the machine, that if they touched it the metal would freeze to their hands instantly.

The cannon makes the creatures scurry down into crevices in furniture, behind picture frames and bathroom cabinets until they realize they cannot escape. They eventually find windows and once salvation is close by, they slow down, sputter in the doorway, grab whatever fruit is within reach before lowering their caps and leaving. They'll find another popsicle, another corner store, another treat. They never see it as losing a house. To the sweethearts, the entire world is summer.

It's late enough in the summer that Minami is getting to be impartial about the sweethearts leaving. She thought they were cute, as everyone does, when they began to settle in during May, June, when the days stretch and stretch and the heat begins to fry plans and thought. People leave trays of watermelon on their doorsteps for the sweethearts and watch them as they walk to view fireworks. The sweetheart clouds descend on the first summer festivals and scrounge for cotton candy, for taiyaki and caramelized mochi.

On the floor, Minami swats another sweetheart landing on her hand. The movement makes her hot. She can feel the sweat in the crook of her neck, in her armpits, where her legs are touching the floor. She lifts her ankles and feels her skin stick, flush and sluggish to the hardwood warmed by her body.

She'll have something cold, she decides. Her stomach has settled enough since the sweets. She's just like the sweethearts, it turns out.

She walks over to the kitchen, disturbing the sweethearts

that are loafed together on the counter. They buzz around the top of the trap's makeshift lid, press on the window from the outside and the inside, curious and noisy. Minami opens the fridge and they scatter, averse to the cold.

Her older brother bought melon drinks. Minami thinks about stealing one. The fridge is full of treasures — the pitcher of mugicha stares at her, watermelon sits red and waiting under plastic wrap.

Minami settles on a milk soda. She pulls it out of the fridge, and then hesitates.

Like this, her head is submerged in the coolness of the fridge. She listens for footsteps and hears nothing.

She watches the sweethearts skitter away from the open fridge, a semi-circle around her. They crawl closer to the windows, closer to the sun. She swats at them. They flutter up into the middle of the kitchen and then settle elsewhere. She sighs. No matter how many traps, no matter how many times she and her family will swat at them — there's no getting rid of them. The sweethearts will stay until they have to leave.

She grabs the soda can. It's cold against her palm, and she puts it to her forehead. She mourns as the fridge door closes.

The air from the fan is only slightly better now that she has a drink. Minami cracks open the soda. It streams down her throat and sits at the top of her stomach. She tries not to chug it; the carbonation will make her stomach ache.

One of the sweethearts crawls towards her again, curious, too fast to have self-preservation but slow enough to be wary. Minami watches it stumble in front of the fan and be blown back a foot or so. It winds up sitting next to her. Minami watches it scuttle in circles as she finishes her milk soda.

Once she's downed her drink, the heat isn't so bad. Perhaps the sun is going down earlier, perhaps fall and its cooler winds have thought about coming early. Perhaps September is about to walk in the room. And then Minami looks at the sweethearts that are lining the back door, resettling in the kitchen, the endless number that are swarming outside and vying for a way in. She sees the sweetheart on the floor inch towards the drops of condensation from her milk soda.

Summer is still here to stay.

# LEFTOVERS

BY JACKY YU

It was my turn to feed mama tonight. Time flowed past as my unfinished task seared into my brain like some prisoner performing self-flagellation. I atrophied upon the bed staring at nothing while the night slipped by. The stars were almost awake, and the owls began their ascent to our great oak tree with its roots twisted through the old grounds of our ancestral home, sheltering insects who gnash at our sanctuary with their knife-like whispers in the dark, poisoning the air. They were no doubt discussing how lucky they were to have such united families.

As the moon rose with its crescent jeer, it mockingly gave its reminder.

“Don’t you have something you need to do?”

Yes. It was my turn to feed mama tonight, but she wasn’t the only one rotting away.

I dragged those limbs off, forced myself to descend, ignored the Head of the Household quietly sobbing in the living room, and made my way to the kitchen where we stored the real estate agent. We still had the calves, and a bit of the torso left, so I hauled them over to a wheelbarrow and headed towards the forest. Towards the well mama was resting in.

Every bump along the road shook the decaying flesh. The lantern flickered in the enveloping darkness, heightening my hesitation. The reverberation of groans felt deep below the dying soil of the Earth made the bones drum. With every one of them, each louder than the one before, an inner battle commenced between obligation and rationality. It was not that I feared for my safety, necessarily. The Head of the Household promised that the well was deep enough, its stones too slippery, for mama to crawl up. Or so he says. The echoes of the cries below the ground would merge with the other night creatures,

never alerting any exorcist. No, my fear was not for my life, for mama could...would never hurt me. My fear was of hurting mama's feelings, if she still had them. There was something important I needed to tell her.

I had arrived. The well, constructed in the heart of our backyard, contained the faint scent of blood and lavender. Wilted flowers bowed their heads in a circle, as if mourners surrounded a hearse. My eyes drifted to the abandoned swing under the great oak tree, and reanimated memories rose in my mind of a child carried in the protective arms of their mother, in a forest where light illuminated from the canopy. Did Rhea ever hold her children so, before they were consumed? Before long, the memories rotted, replaced with that smell of blood. And lavender.

And the sounds of a hungry ghoul.

I dumped the remains into the well.

Two bites. Then three. Then silence.

My job should have been done, if not for the gnawing voice in my head demanding me to announce my freedom.

Say it.

What good would it do?

Say it.

She wouldn't understand.

Say it.

I don't want to hurt her.

Haven't you already?

My voice porcelain, I bared my heart out to the dark for all souls who may still be present.

"Mama...I want to tell you something."

Razors in my throat seemed to lodge the next sentence from springing forth, but the rocks in my stomach vomited it out.

"I'm moving away."

A silence. Then weeping.

"There's a place I found, the next town over, that accepted me. I can continue my studies there. I already told the... I told dad. He'll keep you company every night from now on."

More weeping, but from who?

"It's not like... I'm going away permanently. I'll still visit... from time to time. I just- I need my life to continue, ma. I need life."

Every day I live in this damn rotting house, as maggots munch at old guts and drink old bloodstains, I'm being devoured. You, who gave me this world, are taking it away. Every time you dine to escape Death's embrace, it's my soul you're eating.

That part I left unsaid.

A sigh, held onto for many years, finally let itself go. It may have just been the tears, but I felt a soothing touch, invisible, brush my face.

"When I come back, it'll be spring. New lotus flowers will be born soon. I'll place them by the well. I'm sure you still want something new."

I turned away, leaving my mother behind. As I walked back, the sound of the swing rocking against the wind reminded me of the vision of the child lost in time.

That night, during the hour of the wolf, I dreamt of nothing but whiteness. Outside, where even the owls have retreated in their great oak tree and the insect families have become silent, something came up from the well. It glided up across the field, using its gaunt arms to climb up to the windowsill, and entered my room. The noise of the curtains retreating and the rush of the breeze blowing in awakened me, but I kept my eyes shut. Had she come out of anger? Retribution? Had she come to prevent me from leaving? Perhaps if she cannot keep my heart from straying, she could keep my body. I felt her presence closer towards the bed, bony fingers reaching out—

and started stroking my hair. She sang a soft lullaby, one I hadn't heard in ages, in a voice I thought no longer remained. Her song, full of sophistication, strength, life. Her touch, warm and gentle. The memories of the child I resolved to abandon were reborn.

When the morning comes, I will leave this house of death. I will begin a new phase, and she will remain as she is. The bodies will continue piling up. But for now, in this moment, a mother is comforting her child, wishing them a safe journey and awaiting their return.

# TOME V

BY DIANA RADENKO

*ILLUSTRATED BY MAIYA SCHMIDT*

There is a volume on the shelf. It is bound in deep blue cloth, dark as ink, its spine thick. There is only a V inscribed upon it, and no other adornments. I do not remember where the book came from—it seems to me that it was always there, always watching me from behind the closed door. I have never opened it. Perhaps it is because I am afraid, or that opening it will take away its mystery and wonder. I simply find that my curiosity does not extend to it like it does to the others. I think that if I open it, I will lose something of myself, for this is a book that would take and take, if I allowed it to. It sits between the others and eats their light.

This is a book that would tear out others' pages, rip them out at the spine and spit them out again if they were not to taste. It is a vicious, terrible volume. But I cannot make myself get rid of it. Books that want to eat you have a way of coming back in ways that you cannot predict. If this one is set on consuming me, then throwing it out would only prolong the inevitable.

It taunts me: I should make my peace with it now, and accept that I will not have another book like this again. That I will not see or read another book like this again, if I choose to open it. It is the first and last of its kind.

I reach for it. I know how dangerous it is and yet I reach for it anyway. This is my secret pleasure: I take it from its slot on the shelf and stroke its spine as if to soothe it, even though it is older and more tenacious and stronger than I am. But I have always been my grandmother's bookkeeper, and when she entrusted her library to me she told me to care for it, this was the way that I cared.

Methodically, I take the other volumes from the shelf and set them in a stack on the mahogany reading table. I flip through some others carelessly between dusting the shelves, but the blue book watches me all the while, almost as a petulant child would. I cannot flip through your pages; I tell it. I imagine it turning its chin in disappointment, its displeasure evident in the fine lines separating spine and cover—its very own frown.

When I set the books back I set that one in last, like a final sordid capstone. If it could move it would have writhed like my grandmother's old cat did; violently and hissing through its teeth. That cat was the bookkeeper before I was—it would always sit on the sill in the library and swish its tail between the long curtains, eyes pale and unblinking. I imagine it must have watched that book too, day after day after day.

I never figured out where the cat went. But I remember the last day I saw it was the only time I ever saw the book opened. It was before my grandmother had passed, and she had run into the space with the vigour of a woman half her age when she saw it laying out on the table. She had slammed it shut, put her weight on it, and warned me to always watch this one. I remember still that the pages were scrawled wildly, and that the ink itself churned and stormed and paced the page. As if it had pushed itself open and was demanding its own freedom at the top of its leatherbound voice.

I could almost hear it, even now.

When I turn out the lights, it seems to whisper in the dark.





Maulja  
CDS  
Oct. 25.2024



# 1974

BY PHOEBE SOZOU

*ILLUSTRATED BY FATEHA AHMAD*

autumn on the island: warm, bright.  
shores caked in sun. grapevines flushed  
yellow, draining summer out into the  
courtyard. rain, if you're lucky, flattening the  
sand along the coast, puncturing  
sheets of sea foam before they recede  
into the great blue. forest fires cool  
on the heels of august, while in the  
mountains, trees simmer with  
traces of bronze in the turning season  
as if they haven't noticed. everything  
is different now—the turtles did not  
hatch this year. mornings on the porch  
bite just enough that your mother casts  
her shawl around your shoulders. there  
are five people sleeping on your neighbour's  
floor and a long green line snaking  
through the city you were born in. land  
has no sense of belonging; land forgets.  
see the cracked earth stretch across the  
jagged divide, see the rivers reach, see the  
waves swarming empty coves. the sea remains  
whole. blood on the ground and still, the  
olives will ripen soon. in a thousand years the  
island will not know the names of the soldiers  
on the beach or the red flag on the hill. she  
will not know about christmas, only iron-rich  
soil, warblers, the fanning roots of palm trees.  
even the cliffs will wear different faces. even  
the city, whatever endures, will seem as one.





# WELCOME HOME

BY BIEW BIEW SAKULWANNADEE

*ILLUSTRATED BY FELIXE PELLIZZARI*

**WARNING** FOR EMOTIONAL ABUSE

You used to tell me stories of this house.  
How you built it, brick by brick, decorating it with portraits of loving couples and happy families.

I remember how warm it was, so much so that the cold could not come tear my soul away.

Shadows could not come creeping in, for every room had a light burning bright.

Your secret?

“Well I can’t tell you outright, but you’ll learn soon, my dear.”

And so I lived in the light, sickness waxing and waning, more toys and playthings filling the rooms one by one.

Soon enough, visitors would approach our house, asking for a tour, to play with the child inside.

“Those people hold darkness in their hearts. They mean to use you, to sap away your light, to take you away from me. I only wish to keep you safe.

I am your lightbringer, and so long as I live, we shall never part.”

I had no reason to fear your words, comforting me like a child’s blanket.

I can’t remember anything about the first time I asked to venture outside: Not the day, nor the weather, not even the color of the sky.

What I remember is the bricks grinding, portraits falling from the walls, your face contorting ever so slightly, then carefully sewing itself together in a picture of put-together elegance.

“Did you not listen to my words, stupid child? I have seen

the world outside, and you would be lucky to escape with a mere flesh wound. They will tear you apart from limb to limb, they will see how useless and naive you are, and they will not hesitate to use that against you.

I am your guardian angel, you cannot be hurt under my watchful eye.”

“Now, dinner will be served in 20 minutes. I made your favourite.”

The next day, you didn’t remember your words, saying a mere “sorry” as one would to a stranger when bumping their shoulder on a crowded street.

It wasn’t sudden, but looking back upon it now, the house became ever so slightly warmer, as if to burn away my traitorous thoughts.

Over the years, I settled into this life. From a mere child to a growing teen. Breakfast at 10, lunch at 2, dinner at 7. New gifts and presents scattered around, collecting dust. The world would pass us by, shadows and light intertwined with each other.

One day, I would take off my shirt only to find shadows crawling through my chest, dancing together with the light.

I wanted to ask.

So dearly I wanted to ask.

“What’s happening to me? Why is this here? Why isn’t it killing me?”

I can’t remember what happened after I said those words. I just remember waking up, years and years later, my body fuller and taller, with scratches and bites slowly healing on my arms and hands.

Oh, that’s right, it’s lunchtime.

As I walked downstairs, I was met with a sweltering heat.

The bricks, once pleasant and smooth, now scrape at my skin and bones. My flesh boils and burns, my nerves alight with wildfire.

“What’s wrong, dear? Can’t let those dark vassals corrupt you now, can I? Now stop dithering around, it’s very unbecoming of you. Come now, I made your favourite.”

No paintings of happy couples hung on the walls anymore — It was only photos of me. — My face, my hands, my innocent smile captured over the years. Your hands around

me, caressing and protecting, warding against all evils. Tendrils seeping from between the bricks, grasping my limbs, rooting me in my place.

Your smile warms my heart. A stitchwraith of affection.

“I love you. Don’t you love me too?”

Does it not feel nice, to be loved this way? To have a home to return to rather than none at all?

Perhaps it does.

I sit down and eat.







# A FAMILIAR STRANGER

BY ADAORA OLISA

ILLUSTRATED BY FATEHA AHMED

“**H**ERE ARE THE 5 SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR.”  
I switch the channel, and a baking show comes on. I swear, every four years a conspiracy theory gets super popular and the media jumps on it. This one is no different from the one about the UFOs. My mom thinks what they’re saying is true; that woman would believe just about anything, like how she believes she’s a great parent.

I check my watch. 6:30 PM. You should’ve been here by now; I wonder what’s taking so long? It can’t be that hard to buy a head pillow and sleeping mask.

It’s the last night before you’re off tomorrow to catch your flight. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting to get a phone call from you, surprised you even remembered my number. It had been almost five years since we last saw each other at our high school graduation ceremony. You didn’t come to the prom (as expected by pretty much everyone).

It was nice hearing your voice though. We chatted for a bit. You decided to take a gap year and explore the world, from Cameroon to Vietnam to England. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. You, who cried in tenth grade for having to leave home for a three-day summer camp (you left on the second day), traveling outside the country? Flying aliens sounded more likely.

Long story short, you asked if you could stay at my place for a bit. Apparently, our hometown is a pit stop to your next destination (don’t know where) but you don’t know of any other family members you could stay with. I said yes, of course I would, it’d be nice to hang out with an old friend, if only for a short while.

I check my watch again: 6:36 PM. I pick up my phone to check Instagram but decide against it. My feed is not curated well enough that some crap about ‘impersonators’ won’t come up.

I try calling you. Straight to voicemail. Go figure, you barely use your phone anyways. It’s the one thing that’s stayed the same about you.

Because the truth is, in these past few days you’ve felt more like a stranger than an old friend. For starters, you don’t believe in God. I mean, a God. You consider yourself a “practitioner of all faiths.” This was the change I was least surprised by. You hated going to service, always begged me to come with you to keep you from falling asleep. It didn’t help that your parents were hardcore Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The stutter is gone, which is good, I guess. Problem is, I can’t figure out half of what you’re saying because you speak with, like, five accents at the same time. You pretty much hate all kinds of music, saying that it hurts your ears. You only listen to white noise, even hum to it as you go on about your business.

You don’t remember much from high school, except that you agree you were a loser back then. You write a lot, especially in that black journal of yours, always scribbling something down. I caught a peek of it one time. You were on the couch writing, and I was standing behind you. I leaned my head forward a bit; even your handwriting had changed. It used to be so easy to read; now I can’t make out a single letter.

You noticed me behind you and snapped the journal close in alarm. Did I imagine it or was that fear in your eyes?

I check the time again. 6:45 PM. I get up, stretch out the ache in my bones (how long have I been sitting there for?) and grab myself a glass of water. As I walk into the kitchen, the first thing I notice is your phone on the counter. Must’ve forgotten it on your way out, which I find difficult to believe with just how slow it took you to get ready. Seriously, you spent, like, 20 minutes in front of the bathroom mirror, naked, checking yourself out. I didn’t know someone could be that fascinated with their body.

I pick up the phone and try to unlock it. Dead — as usual. Now that I think about it, I don’t remember you ever using your

phone except for when I tried to have you download Bumble. Anyhow, there goes my plan of calling or texting you.

As I pour myself some water, I recall how a few days ago we were both in the kitchen when I accidentally bumped into the counter, knocking the box of spaghetti off it. In the blink of an eye, you were there to catch it. I didn't even know where you came from. You're fast like that now, and graceful almost like a ballerina.

Once I gulp the glass down, I go back to the living room to my usual spot on the couch. I look up at the clock above the main entrance: 6:53 PM. I should make dinner soon, just for myself, most likely, since you barely eat. It honestly concerns me, and that's saying something, since I eat, like, two meals a day max.

I loiter for a bit. I play Candy Crush — I'm on level 12500 now. I pick up a newspaper for the first time in *years*, and almost immediately regret my decision. Five murders occurring in the span of two weeks. Three women and two men. Throats torn open. They still haven't caught the person.

Okay, now I'm starting to get a bit worried. It's going to get dark soon and I have no way to communicate with you. But those murders happened in a city that's, like, seven hours away from us. There's no way the killer will drive all the way down here to kill a bunch more. You'll be fine. I may not know you as well anymore, but I trust you.

Besides, you have friends here; friends you've made since you arrived who can protect you. They've all been men (you said they're easier to be friends with. I wanted to mention something about internalized misogyny, but I held my tongue), and I met one of them. An aspiring guitarist with deft hands and too-curious eyes that wouldn't stop roaming my body.

After he left, I told you that I didn't want him in my apartment.

"Don't worry," you said, cleaning up the empty bottles of beer, "you'll never see him again."

7:20 PM. I wake up to the sound of knocking. I shoot up from the couch, sprint-walk to the door, hoping, *praying* it's you.

It's the old lady next door, Mabel, I believe. Her heater broke down and she needs help calling the maintenance. We try,

and it takes multiple times before the guy picks up. As we wait for him to come, we watch some TV together.

I'm going through the channels when she grabs my arm, stopping me at this news channel.

"Wait, I want to see this."

The story here seems to be about a family that claims to have been affected by these 'impersonators' and they've taken their husband. It's so ridiculous that I almost turn it off. The lady lightly slaps my hand away from the remote.

It then switches to an interview with the husband.

"Was there any particular reason as to why you chose him?"

The husband shifts in his seat, a blank expression on his face that's so devoid of, well *anything*. "It's simply because he was there. We're not picky, we choose who we see first. And that was him. Nothing more than that."

The interviewer coughs, clearly disturbed. "I see, and don't you have any regrets? For stealing, taking away his life?"

He tilts his head slightly to the side, considering. You do that too, whenever you're trying to answer any of my questions about your life beyond the simple ones you gave me. I'm not sure why I'm remembering that now.

"No, I don't. I'm not like the others; I don't seek destruction. I like the life I have, raising a family with a nice wife in a peaceful neighborhood. It's... simple, which I'm not used to, but nice. And I think they grew to like me, even more than the previous... one"

"Indeed, they did, but that's not the case anymore, is it?" The interviewer's lips spread thin into a mocking smile.

For the first time since the interview, an undercurrent of emotion passes through his face. Shame.

"You'd be correct."

"Anything you'd like to say to them?"

He speaks. "That I'm sorry. That I didn't mean to hurt them and — that I ask for their forgiveness, however little it may be."

A commercial comes on. I find that I have nothing to say, only a vague awareness that what I just watched may actually be real. Not a conspiracy theory, joke, or rumour. Real. And I'm terrified.

"I think there's something wrong with my son," Mabel

whispers, her head turned down, hands clasped together tightly, as if in prayer. “He’s not remembering things as he’s supposed to, doesn’t act right. Is what they’re saying on the news true? Have one of those things taken my son?”

I desperately grasp for any control. Reason. “What? Of course not, he’s just a teenager, change is normal.”

She nods, though not in agreement. “Of course I know that. I don’t expect him to stay the same, and he is at that age where all sorts of things become apparent to them. It’s just. I don’t know, it kind of feels like having a stranger in the house. A familiar one.”

8:00 PM. The lady has left, and you’re still not back. I consider the possibility that you might be dead. That you were taken away by those things. My eyes are heavy, I didn’t even do that much today but I feel so *tired*. I decide to sleep early tonight. If you come, you come. You’ll be the one missing the flight, not me. I go to the door to unlock it, so that you can come in but something in me tells me not to. You can just knock, I’ll let you in eventually.

I shuffle into my bedroom. It’s messy, at least my side is. Yours is perfectly neat, not a hair out of place. You used to *not* be like that, you always came to school missing something, a binder, homework, pencil case. all that. You weren’t a lot of things that you are now. I miss that version of you.

Under the blanket covers, my foot hits something solid. I reach down to grab it and come out holding the journal. I consider reading a bit, but that would be disrespectful. I go over to put it on top of your suitcase, which is already packed, when something slips out through the pages.

Two things, actually. One is a ripped-out page, written on it is a myriad of things, it’s hard to uncover what is what. I recognize my name, which is written in several places, an address to the convenience store, a phone number and... reminders. *Don’t forget to eat with her — compliment the food. Mom is dead. Smile more.*

First, all I feel is confusion. Then a sickly feeling starts to arise in me. The kind that comes when reading a book with scary pictures, the sense of foreboding before you turn the page.

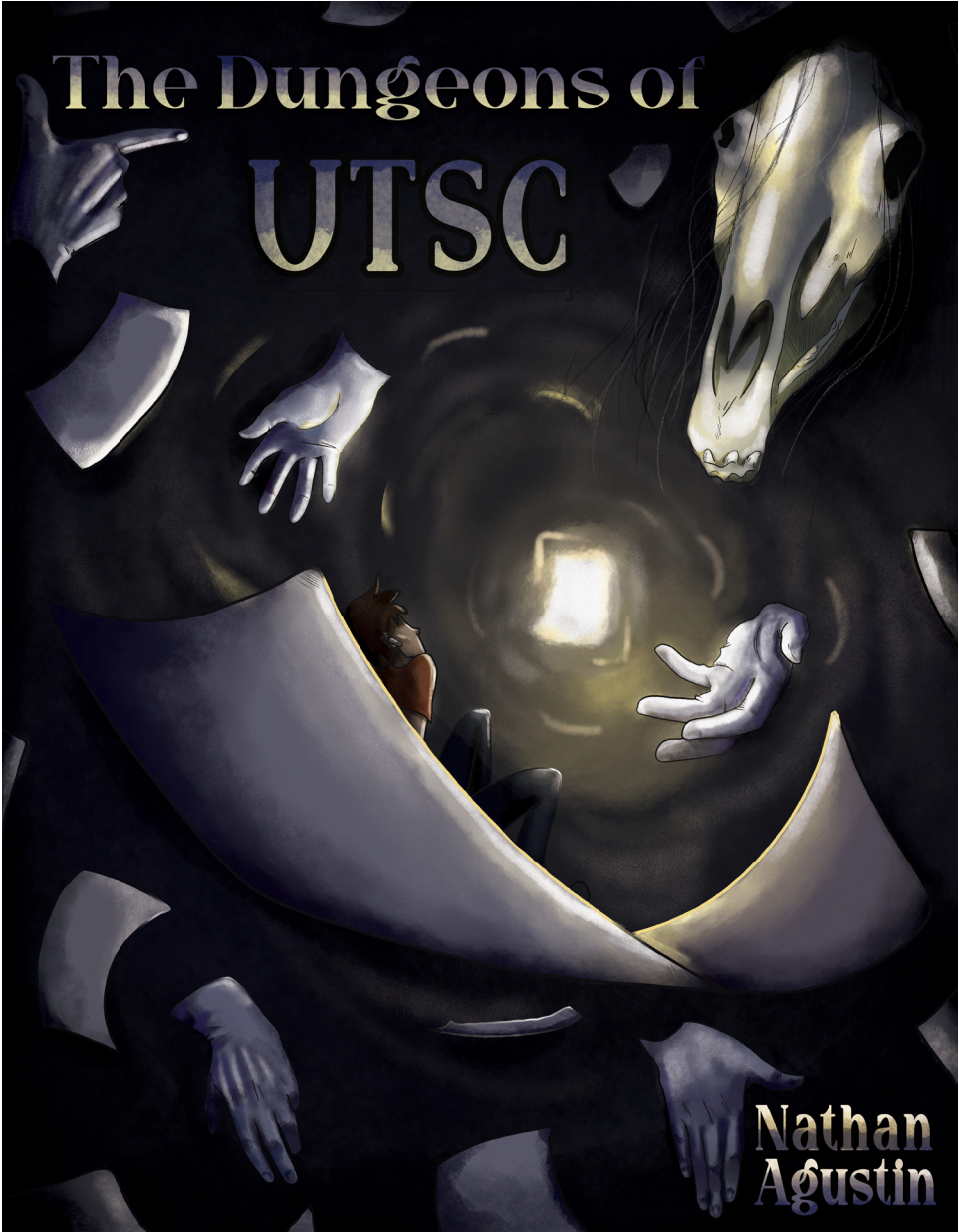
I look at the other thing, this one is a map of the entire

town. Red circles have been drawn around certain neighborhoods. I read the name of one of them: Bay County. Where you went tonight. Supposed to at least. Beside it is a list of names, I recognize one of them, *Jordan*, the guitarist.

Underneath those names is “do not leave any remains.”

A loud knock comes from the door. My hand stills, fingers gripped tightly around the note. Through your voice, I hear *them* for the first time.

“Alex? It’s me, open the door.”



# THE DUNGEONS OF U T S C

BY NATHAN AGUSTIN

*ILLUSTRATED BY ALICE SHARIVKER*

12:55 PM. My class was at 1 o'clock and I was in the armpit of the school. I was already late for my last class because of this confusing song and dance. I was told MW meant the social science building, only to find out it had changed later. So, forgive me for being suspicious that SW could mean science wing.

Bladen wing, humanities wing, science wing, with that many wings, there could've been a seraphim around the corner shouting "be not afraid." Actually, the campus seemed to be shouting the opposite.

There was a long hallway in the humanities wing. Balconies belonging to the different levels got smaller the higher they were. Those above could see those below but not the other way around. A secret warden could've been surveying every student, teacher, and worker and none of us would know.

U of T's motif was supposed to be trees. The class website was called "Quercus" and I applied to all my courses through "Acorn." When I first drove up to the Scarborough campus, I saw the woods around and expected a quaint manor where we would study nature while perfectly blending into it. Instead, the building looked like a prison keeping every threat to society locked away.

Following the online map, I entered the science wing. Room 128, I thought to myself as I entered an open area called "The Meeting Place." Despite the title, it was flat and quiet. My



rustling backpack was the only voice in it. Light filtered in from the crosshatch ceiling. Maybe this was a giant cage repurposed for public use; its original host long gone. But had it been killed or had it escaped this prison?

My class was one floor lower. The elevator was busted, meaning my only option was to take the stairs. Dim lights illuminated the chipped red floors. In the late summer heat, the stairway managed to make itself cold. Each of my steps echoed as if an army was following me down into the depths. I shoved my airpods in my ears to fill the silence.

I cranked the volume as high as it could go, mashing the button even when it reached its max. The illustrious voices of pop singers failed to

When I reached the last step, my ankle rolled, knocking my air pod right out of my ear.

"Oh crap!" I raced to catch it but, in my swing, I accidentally swatted it. It rolled under another flight of stairs blocked off by yellow tape.

"Damnit." I peeked at my phone. 12:57. This would only take a few minutes. Luckily, the airpod was still connected to my music, loud enough to pierce through the oppressive quiet.

I ducked under the tape and followed the source of the sound. But then it got further away.

Maybe it was sitting on a ledge, and the music vibrated it off. I followed it further to a deeper floor of the school. Pipes shot steam along the walls and ceiling. Unlocked lockers spat out flakes of rust, reeking of old nickels. Its floor was basically cobblestone lightly stained with red paint. During it all, my airpod played.

I bent down to pick it up as a hand reached for it with me.

"Oh, I'm sorry, but this is—"

I looked up. The hand reaching for it was just a pair of floating gloves. They were a gaseous white, almost like smoke.

"What the?!" I flew back, the gloves jolting like me. They floated up and flew backwards into the corridor.

I should've run away but it took my airpod with it. Those were a graduation present and way too expensive to lose to a ghost

“Hey, wait!” I chased after the gloves and caught them. They didn’t vanish and were instead as corporeal as actual hands. Unfortunately, they didn’t slow down and dragged me along with them. If not for my thick jeans, my skin would’ve been torn to shreds.

Suddenly, they turned a corner and bolted straight for a closed classroom door.

“Wait! Wait! Wait—”

The gloves and I passed right through as if it didn’t exist. The pungent scent of old parchment and black coffee hit me. Pencils danced on paper. I was in a giant lecture hall. More floating gloves wrote on paper. Some with piles and some with individual sheets. One pair stopped, put down its pencil and set it on a table in the front of the class. Shadows emerged from behind the podium and snatched the paper as if it were fresh prey.

Its head emerged from a black wall, some cross between a lizard and horse skull. Oily hairy draped. The only thing connecting it to the wall was a long, thin, twisting neck.

I froze. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t even think or breathe. My racing heart could alert the beast to my location. I turned back to the door, only to slam into a solid concrete wall.

The creature jolted and launched its head in my direction. I collapsed, holding my hands up. Its black eyes sucked in all the light, leaving only dark holes. “What are you,” it said, dragging each word out, in a choir of different voices layered all into one, “studying?”

The question lowered my guard. “I-I’m sorry?”

“What are you studying?”

“Uh...” I was still wary. If I didn’t answer its question, maybe it would get offended and kill me. “I’m a first year but I think I want to major in biology, maybe minor in some literature or... something?” My voice got higher with each word.

The creature’s head twisted, zooming into my face. “Interesting choices.” I backed away, giving me enough room to stand up.

Ignoring the acid and vomit crawling up my throat, I bowed, unsure if the respect would earn me its mercy. “Thank you.” I gulped.

“I can sense your confusion, child. Confusion finds its

solace here. Ask what you want.”

“I’m... I just...” too many questions filled my head to the point where it felt like I was going to burst. All that emerged was a single, “What are you?”

The creature chuckled, each noise ranging from a chuckle to a snicker to cackle then back again. “I am known to all students everywhere, every essay they have yet to craft, projects they haven’t started, the homework rotting at the bottom of their bags. You may call me, Unwritten.”

Its tone shifted into something calmer. What was once chaos had become harmonious in its voice.

“What are you doing here?” I continued.

“Knowledge likes being contained so I give it a temporary home.”

Another pair of gloves flew to the front of the room with a piece of paper. This time, I intercepted it. It was written in symbols not belonging to any language on Earth but its formatting gave it away.

It was an essay.

Suddenly, the essay glowed and the symbols rearranged themselves into actual words. Its title now read ENG A01 Response 2 before Unwritten devoured it.

Unwritten began to laugh. “That knowledge has been housed so it is no longer mine.”

“Cool...” I faced Unwritten one more time to focus on something familiar, as familiar as a writing monster could be. “This is cool, and it’s very cool — can’t stress enough how cool it all is — but I need some help. I can’t find my classroom. I promise I won’t procrastinate on my work.”

Unwritten shook its head, narrowing a dark eye at me. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep. Knowledge will always be unwritten at one point. That process is called many things: thinking, planning, preparing, editing, dreading. It’s unavoidable for a human to fight it. It is their job to make it then preserve it. I merely shelter it in the intermediate.” It turned its massive head to me once more. “What will your knowledge do?”

I backed away, landing on my ass with a yelp.

Unwritten laughed again, its voice shifting back and forth from female to male, young to old. “I jest. No sense mulling over

the fate of that which isn't even born. In the meantime I look forward to seeing what knowledge you'll unwrite in the future."

Unwritten raised its head and opened its mighty jaw. Instead of a roar or howl, it chirped like a bird, prompting a pair of gloves to stop writing and float to my side. One uncurled itself to reveal my missing airpod while the other beckoned me forward. "My hands will lead you well."

I gave Unwritten a smile and a nod, putting the airpod back in my ear. Its hands led me down the ever-expanding corridor of rusty metal until we reached an open locker. The locker smelled like an old pool, chlorinated and stale. The gloves ushered me in.

Unsure but out of options, I followed. They slammed the door shut, plunging me into darkness.

"Hey! What's going on? Unwritten, let me out!" I banged on the metal door again and again. I shoved my shoulder against it and broke open the door. Pain rang through my entire torso. When I looked up, I found myself back in the science wing.

Right in front of me was classroom SW 128.

I dusted myself off. Hopefully, they would tolerate someone's lateness as a natural part of being a first year. I checked my phone.

It was only 12:55 pm.

# THE OCTOBER HARVEST

BY KATARINA KOJIC

For everyone, October was the month of magic and the paranormal: of witches and zombies; magic and hexes; werewolves and vampires. For everyone, it was all about apple cider and baked pumpkin pie. For ten-year-old Delly, it was about helping Father with the harvest.

With the famine of the late 1990s and raiding becoming more prevalent, a lot of the town's original families were forced to move south, where the sun would scare away the moon's frost and a healthy dew would coat the pumpkin patches. It was only Delly and Father who remained a year later, hoping the new century would bring them happiness and prosperity.

And maybe a new tractor if they were lucky.

Of course, it wasn't easy. That first year was hard. There were nights she couldn't walk into town because the raiders circled her farm, crushing all the squashes and cutting down the unripe corn. Father would go out and watch the crops while Delly would stay in her room, counting the little centipedes crawling in the dark corners. Since there were only a few, she would count their legs instead, seeing if they really did have a hundred legs. Father would stand in the middle of the fields with his torn, plaid button-up and straw hat. While he was a scrawny man, he seemed to get the job done.

One leg. Two legs. Three legs. Four.

"Who the fuck is that, Tom?

Five legs. Six Legs. Seven-

"I thought this land was deserted. Someone living here must

have put him up. Let's get the hell out."

And just like that they were gone.

She would help Father cook dinner. He couldn't really move much. Years of hard labour slowed his hands down. They were quite dry, almost sandy. Small cuts here, an open wound there. Pain didn't seem to register. Nor did hunger. He wouldn't touch the canned soup Delly would warm up. *It's because he doesn't want me to be hungry*, she thought.

On rainy days, she would remember Father telling her to be productive. She would start sewing his torn button-ups. Holes in his clothes wouldn't do. They caused too much of a mess. His body carried too much straw, and if Mother came back, what would she think of such a messy house? About twice a month she would have to sew his eyes back on.

A hard day's work would end with a satisfied Delly lying down in bed once more. Her room was illuminated by the full moon, allowing her to once again count the centipedes to aid her insomnia. It was a good night, with no raiders to be heard. She felt safe knowing Father was out in the fields, guarding. She could hear him sing a lullaby to her across the field, his voice encompassing the sounds of cicadas, crickets, and the crows he would scare away.

She started to count away.

One leg. Two legs. Three legs. Four.

For everyone, October was the month of magic. For Delly, it was a good time spent with Father.

# Masthead & Contributors

## EXECUTIVE

### EDITORS-IN- CHIEF

Jacky Yu  
Katarina Kojic

### MANAGING EDITOR

Miran Tsay

### CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Diana Radenko

### ONLINE MANAGER

Ola Kim

## EDITORIAL

### SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

Rin Ashdown

### GRADUATE ADVISOR

Anya Carter

### SENIOR EDITORS

Phoebe Sozou  
Adaora Olisa  
Claire Ramcharan

### JUNIOR EDITORS

Biew Biew Sakulwannadee  
Nathan Agustin  
Elisa Penha

### FIRST-YEAR REPRESENTATIVE

Jonah Watkins

## ILLUSTRATORS

Alice Sharivker  
Fateha Ahmad  
Felix Pellizzari  
Ishita Chalise  
Maiya Schmidt  
Tyne Vainio

